

The Devil is a Friend of Mine

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The Devil is a Friend of Mine

The pain did help him focus. It burnt across his head and down his spine, lashing fire so intense it stole his breath, his body curling in on itself like burning paper. When it came he knew why. He'd said something bad. Lost his mind and forgot the rules. This was how they dragged him back.

He clutched at the base of his neck, pressed his face to the cool tile floor, and tried to breathe around it. To form the words _sorry, sorry, I'm back, please_

"_What are you doing?_" The shout echoed around the empty white room. _Her_ voice.

No no no He pressed himself against the wall. The pain stopped but that didn't matter. She'd heard what he'd said and she was _angry now. He'd made her angry. This wasn't enough. She'd come to hurt him herself now that he couldn't fight back. Like she'd done so many times. He gasped in lungful after careful lungful of air and tried not to scream. He could lose another leg.

That wasn't true. Not all of it. Some of it? But he remembered her. He remembered her digging her fingers into his wound as he screamed. Stroking medicine over it, her gentle fingers bringing cool relief. Backhanding him for being so _stupid_. Kissing him. And every memory colored with the aftertaste of screaming venom or suffocating morphling, so maybe none of it was true at all.

She came to talk to him once. That was real. No aftertaste. He didn't know if that girl would hurt him. She hadn't been very nice.

The something hit the floor beside him with a soft plastic click. A moment later, shouts and a gunshot. He curled up tighter, breathing.

Minutes passed. He dared a glance up " _she_ was standing there, by the door, with a gun. His stomach fell, like looking over a sheer drop and he finally did scream, like a wounded animal. She was here to kill him.

"No. Please, please, _please_ " don't," she cried out. Her eyes darted around. " _Delly_ told me they were hurting you," she said desperately. "Delly Cartwright," she said, like someone invoking magic words. "Delly asked me to help."

It was a good choice. The name calmed him, stopped the scream coming out of his mouth. If it was a lie, it was a good one. It made sense. He remembered how sad Delly looked when they did it in front of her. She cried and left early. He thought it was because she was disgusted with him.

Maybe not.

He looked at the floor. It was easier to make sense of things around her if he didn't look right at her. He saw that the thing on the floor near him was the grey controller box and nearly started screaming again. He wanted to grab it, to break it, to never see it again.

Haymitch's voice over the speakers. "Sweetheart, you need to let us in. This isn't safe." That was the voice he used when he visited. When he was trying to reason with a crazy person.

"No," she said. She was trying not to sound angry. It wasn't working. "You wanted me to visit him. Well, I'm here. Just" leave us alone for a while."

"Sweetheart" Haymitch was careful not to say her name around him.

"Did you know they were doing this to him?" The cold rage in her whisper was worse than a shout.

It brought up memories he had to shove down

Long pause. "They said it would help "

"You should have _told_ me "

"Sweetheart" It was beginning to sound pathetic.

He glanced up to see her reaction.

"Shut up. Leave us alone. I " I want," she pushed her sleeve back and read off a list. "A new treatment plan. From a new doctor. Doctor" she squinted at her wrist, "Lewis from District 8. You will print a copy for both of us to read and edit. Don't talk to me until you have it."

The speakers crackled and went silent.

"How do you know about Doctor Lewis?" he asked, eyeing the controller. If he grabbed it she might shoot him.

"Prim told me he was nice."

"Oh," he said. Prim was nice too. She visited regularly. Talked about her cat, since a lot of other topics set him off. He was a magnificent hunter. He'd bring her the bloody heads of his kills. _That's how they say I love you_, she said. One day she came in with red scratches on her hand from the animal. He didn't understand how she could love a beast like that. "I like Prim," he said.

He could tell that it surprised her, to hear him say something pleasant. Her eyes went soft and sad.

He took advantage of her distraction, snatching the controller up and clutching it against his chest, shuddering at the inevitable punishment.

It didn't come.

"It's okay," she said quietly. "You can have that."

He pulled himself up into a sitting position, leaned back against the wall. Frowned at her. "Are you stupid?" he asked, clutching the controller.

Her face went hard, her chin raising in defiance. As if he was the one with the gun. It was almost a relief; soft wasâ€| confusing.

"They're doing this to _protect_ you," he explained. It's what they said. Though he wondered about that. If they punished him for _saying_ _bad things about her_ wouldn't that just mean there'd be less of a warning when he was going to hurt her?

The real her was so easy to read. Small and plain and transparent as a children's book. She paled and frowned. "I don't want to be protected like that," she said, tilting her head toward the controller.

"Are you stupid?" he repeated. "They showed me a video â€" of what I did to you." He stroked the controller in his hand, reassuring himself it was there before saying things he wasn't supposed to admit. "Part of me was _glad_ I'd hurt you like that." He'd seen himself striking back for once against this monster this _filthy mutt_â€| and he'd seen a scared girl too. Her face and body language open, trusting. Taken down by a snarling animal. Part of him was really sorry for that. But whenever he opened his mouth, mean words came out. "I could kill you."

Tears came to her eyes. "I â€" her voice shook, her hand tightening on the gun, "don't want to be protected like this," she repeated.

It was noble. And confusing. He was really tired of trying to figure out what was real himself. He held the controller close. It had almost been comforting, knowing they'd punish him when he got it wrong. And now that was gone too.

"You could shoot me," he suggested. "Get it all over with."

She shook her head.

"You'd be doing me a favor," he said, and meant it. His family was gone. His mind was gone. He was nothing but a burden here. Eating their food. Wasting their time and medicine. A test subject. Or an obligation for those too kind-hearted to spend their time in more pleasant company, like Delly and Prim. Haymitch too, though he'd known about the controller for a while so he couldn't be too kind-hearted.

Delly went for help when she saw.

Went to this girl. This girl who wasn't very nice but her name should be on that list too, he supposed. Too kind-hearted to stay away. But he couldn't put her name down because he might break her neck thinking of it.

He laughed. "Really, I wouldn't mind." She'd just have to do what his brain was screaming she was going to do. Walk over, put the gun to his head, blow his brains out.

She stared at him in horror and didn't do a damn thing. "You're really disappointing in the flesh," he said.

Instead of getting angry, she started crying. Choking sobs and hot, fat tears crawling down her face.

He'd made a girl cry. Nobody had to use the controller for him to know that was wrong.

He crawled over to the bed slowly and then pulled himself up on to it, started fastening the straps around his ankles.

"What are you doing?" she sniffled. What kind of a lunatic would be afraid of her? But he still was, it was just—back into a dark corner, screaming that she was lying _lying_ and as long as she lived he'd never be safe, while the rest of him worked on the straps.

"If you're not going to shoot me and you don't want the controller _somebody_ has to stop me killing you," he explained, fastening the buckle on his left wrist. He held out his right, looking away from her. "I need you to do this one."

Long seconds dragged on. He felt fear and rage clawing up his throat at the thought of her coming close. "Quickly, _please_,_" he begged. And then she was there, buckling the strap with deft fingers and disappearing back to her corner of the room before he lost it.

He closed his eyes and shook, struggling with the straps. The pain helped him hold on. When he looked up, her eyes were dark, hard.

"President Snow did this to you," she said. "Do you know that?"

"Yeah," he said. They told him often enough. It wasn't quite real, not like the rage he felt toward her. Even though he knew it _was_ real. There was a man in the Capitol who made him a murderer.

"I'm going to kill him," she said. And finally, there it was, the face of his dread: set, cold, sure. The face of a killer. But not a happy one. She wasn't bragging or pretending. Somewhere in her heart she'd already killed this man and now she was waiting to make it real. It was a simple matter of fact.

"Weren't you always going to kill him?" he asked. Was she the vulnerable girl who cried and came in here to protect him or the monster who haunted his mind or something else?

"If I had to," she said, plain and simple. Unashamed. It was fascinating. She was a killer, that was real. But not the monster in his mind. "Now I'm just going to. No matter what," she said.

"Why?"

"Because of this," she said.

"Vengeance. Is that going to help me?" he asked. The thought didn't bring any comfort, not like the thought of her death. And if his doctors were to be believed, people had forced him to feel that way. "Make me feel better?"

"No," she said firmly. Then, doubt crossed her face. "Not when I knew you."

"Will it make you feel better?" he snapped because she was selfish, selfish wasn't she?

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Then why?"

"This has to end," she said. She looked up at him, struggling for words. "Everything he's done. There's a debtâ€¦" she explained, "only his life can end it."

She sounded like something out of a folk story. Blood and honor and debts owed. The kind of grisly stories boys liked. He didn't remember liking them much. It seemed like she did.

She comforted herself with plans for cold-blooded murder. Not even hot revenge. Cold and sure. Blood for blood

"You're a strange girl," he said. "And not very nice."

"You said that before," she said, irritably.

"Delly's a nice girl," he sing-songed, goading her.

"That's great," she said. She was so transparent she might as well have had a sign around her head flashing RESENTMENT and JEALOUSY.

He laughed. "Delly left when she saw what they were doing. You â€œ" he licked his lips, rocked against the restraints, focusing on the tally of offenses. He was on to something here and he wasn't going to let the other thoughts push it away. "Broke in, assaulted the staff, stole a gun, took a hostage, and risked your life alone with a mad man. Who still wants to kill you," he added.

"Yeah, well. You're not doing a very good job of it, are you?" she snapped.

He felt himself smiling. "When you kill Snow," he said, "are you going to bite his head off and bring it to me like a cat with a dead bird?" That was how vicious beasts said I love you.

Giddiness thrilled through him and he twisted his wrists so the pain would hold other thoughts back. He was on to something here. He was.

She went a little green. "Do you want-?" she started.

He laughed. "You're not very bright."

She scowled.

"I don't. But if I didâ€¦"

"What does it matter? You said you didn't want it."

"But if I did," he pushed. "If I did," he repeated, staring at her. He was on to something. "Would you?"

"â€¦yes," she said.

He laughed again. "You're a monster," he said, happily.

She flinched away, looked at the floor.

"Noâ€¦ noâ€¦." he shook his head. "No, look at me."

She shook her head.

"Look at me," he ground out, the rage pushing forward, pain at his wrists and ankles as he struggled.

"Okay, okayâ€¦" she said, meeting his eyes. "What?"

"They kept telling me that it was a lie. Everything was a lie. They pumped me full of morphling and tried to make me believe the opposite of the lies â€" that you weren't a monster. That you were a nice girl. But that's not the truth. You aren't a nice girl. You're a killer. You're a monster. Butâ€¦" he licked his lips, "I think you're my monster."

Her face actually softened at that twisted confession. "And you're mine," she said.

He nodded, sighed back against the thin institutional mattress. "You should come see me."

"I will," she promised. "I won't let them hurt you again."

He kept nodding, warm joy wrapping itself around his heart. It wasn't cool comfort or hot forced rage. It was real.

After that the voice over the loudspeaker, the documents and debates, the shouting, the final resolution of the hostage situation. It

blurred together. They had to sedate him. But it was fine, it was just fine. No more controller. And now he knew. He wasn't just a burden. He belonged to somebody.

One day he'd be able to think her name without trying to hurt her.

End
file.